

A Diasporic Dilemma: Cultural Variance in Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*

Meenu Kumari
M.A, M. Phil

Dept. of English & Foreign Languages
Maharshi Dayanand University
Rohtak

Abstract

Born in London, Lahiri moved to Rhode Island as a young child with her Bengali parents. Although they have lived in the United States for more than thirty years, Lahiri observes that her parents retain a sense of emotional exile and she herself grew up with conflicting expectations. Her abilities to convey the oldest cultural conflicts in the most immediate fashion and to achieve the voices of many different characters are among the unique qualities that have captured the attention of a wide audience. The fact that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants and that she also crosses borders when she migrates from England – where she was born – to become an American citizen, makes her both a migrant and diasporic writer. In her work, she reflects on the Indian diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of diaspora.

Keywords: Diaspora, Cultural, Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Born in London, Lahiri moved to Rhode Island as a young child with her Bengali parents. Although they have lived in the United States for more than thirty years, Lahiri observes that her parents retain a sense of emotional exile and she herself grew up with conflicting expectations. Her abilities to convey the oldest cultural conflicts in the most immediate fashion and to achieve the voices of many different characters are among the unique qualities that have captured the attention of a wide audience. The fact that Jhumpa Lahiri is the child of Indian immigrants and that she also crosses borders when she migrates from England – where she was born – to become an American citizen, makes her both a migrant and diasporic writer. In her work, she reflects on the Indian diaspora and creates a narrative that reveals the inconsistency of the concept of identity and cultural difference in the space of diaspora.

Lahiri's expression of the sense of alienation continues in "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" which presents the cultural unanimity between an Indian family and Pakistani young man in a foreign country. Mr. Pirzada is from Dacca, then a part of Pakistan. He left behind his wife and seven daughters for a fellowship to study the foliage of New England. Since his fellowship provided for only a meager dorm room, he comes to ten years old Lilia's home to eat with her parents and to watch the news of the Indo-Pakistan War. In the story Pirzada suffers from the agony of separation from his family, wife and seven daughters who are in his homeland Dacca. While dining with Lilia's parents, he keeps his pocket watch "set to the local time in Dacca,

eleven hours ahead on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table” (Lahiri, IOM 30). Lilia remembers how her parents and Pirzada have watched the formation of Bangladesh in 1971, bloodshed and killing on T.V with sad hearts and shared their feelings of past and present displacement. And yearning to be connected to their part of the world, it was Lilia’s parents’ destiny to search for the compatriots through the University directory every new semester. This sort of identification, empathy and like-mindedness forms a strategy to reduce the alienated feelings that normally grip the immigrants. The children of the immigrants read the history and geography of America in schools and have assimilated their culture. But still, these children carry with them the past history of ‘origin’ of their parents and grandparents. Lilia who is able to recognize a similarity between Mr. Pirzada and her parents, feel alienated when Mr. Pirzada returns to his homeland. She broods, “I knew what it meant to miss someone who was so many miles and hours away, just as he had missed his wife and daughter for so many months” (Lahiri, IOM 42).

In the title story “Interpreter of Maladies” the affluent American born Indians, Mr. and Mrs. Das are on a trip to India with their three children. The protagonist Mr. Kapasi is an interpreter and tour guide who takes them to the Sun temple at Konark. But Mrs. Das and family groomed in American culture feel bored and lack curiosity: “... Mrs. Das gave an impatient sigh, as if she had been travelling her whole life without a pause” (Lahiri, IOM 47). But Mrs. Das suffers a malady that is deep-rooted, the secret guilt that her second son, Bobby was not her husband’s. She finds Mr. Kapasi the right interpreter for her malady and speaks out, “Eight years Mr. Kapasi, I’ve been in pain. I was hoping you could help me better, say the right thing. Suggest some kind of remedy” (Lahiri, IOM 65). Kapasi considers it as his bounden duty to assist Mrs. Das and so he asked, “Is it really pain you feel, Mrs. Das, or is it guilt?” (Lahiri, IOM 66). This story stands exceptional among all other stories for its powerful narration and fascination of the third world people to the European life. The story shows how the everyday language of a common Indian becomes a western language.

Lahiri believes that Indian immigrants face humiliating experiences not only in America but in every kind of dominant culture and in other nations. The predicament of Boori Ma in “A Real Durwan” is a fine illustration of this fact. Boori Ma, a Bengali and born of a lower caste is sent to Calcutta after the partition. As a self-appointed sweeper of the stairwell of a multi-storied building her services “came to resemble those of a real durwan” (Lahiri, IOM 73). She considers herself ‘an outsider’, ‘broken inside’, and feels “burned like peppers across her thinning scalp and skin, was of a less mundane origin” (Lahiri, IOM 75). Ultimately, she is suspected to be the informer to the robbers and is thrown out of the place when a few things of the locality are stolen in her absence. Jhumpa Lahiri underscores the impossibility of an exile communicating emotional pain and loneliness to others through the characterization of Boori Ma: “Knowing not to sit on the furniture, she crouched; instead, in doorways and hallways, and observed gestures and manners in the same way a person tends to watch traffic in a foreign city” (Lahiri, IOM 176).

“Sexy” is the story that shows the falling marital relationship among young emigrant Indians. The story is about the extra -marital relationship between an Indian and a western woman as well as her feelings toward valuable relationships. In “Sexy” Miranda, an American, develops an

extramarital relationship with a married Indian, Dev. She is attracted to Dev for his age and his race. He is interesting, mature, wealthy, and complementary to Miranda in a way that she has not known before. But the relationship shatters for more than one reason. It happens not only because Miranda realizes that she cannot expect more than physical fulfillment from Dev but also because of the definition, that Rohin, her Indian friend Laxmi's cousin's child gives to the term 'sexy'. To him it means 'loving someone you don't know'. Miranda realizes that is precisely what she did. He tells her further that "that's what my father did... he sat next to someone he doesn't know, someone sexy, and now he loves her instead of my Mother" (Lahiri, IOM 108). Miranda now understands that she is drawn to Dev for his surface value, and also that Dev does not love Miranda for who she is. Even without the dress, she is simply a mistress – not a woman. Thinking about her own situation, she begins to cry. From then on Miranda stops meeting Dev.

"Mrs. Sen" is a story which explores the life of an emigrant Indian through the European point of view. It is an archetypal story of the cultural outsider, but even her plight is offset by the loneliness of little Eliot, her faithful ward for a few hours every day. The story presents the real difficulties faced by Indian wives in an alien culture, without friends and family, struggling to cope with the new surroundings they cannot call their home. Bharati Mukerjee rightly claims in *Massachusetts Review*, "When an Asian man comes to America for economic transformation, and brings a wife who winds up being psychologically changed" (47). Mrs. Sen's mannerisms, cooked dishes which she serves to Eliot's mother as a mark of Indian hospitality are despised by Eliot's mother. Mrs. Sen feels bad and insulted many a time by her remarks and always feels restless and uneasy, though she knows her relatives in India, "think I live the life of a queen..." (Lahiri, IOM 125). Mrs. Sen's consciousness is always preoccupied with the thoughts of her home for everything, is there, in India, shows that diasporas construct imaginary homelands from the fragmentary odds and ends of memory. Eliot is astonished to note, "When Mrs. Sen said the home, she meant India, not the apartment where she sat chopping vegetables" (Lahiri, IOM 116). Mrs. Sen's thoughts and attempts to resist the continuing agency of power of Eliot's mother end in tears and silence during her driving when "She was so startled by the horn that she lost control of the wheel and hit a telephone pole on the opposite corner" (Lahiri, IOM 134).

"The Blessed House" is the story that shows the adjustment of young emigrant Indians to a new culture and beliefs. The best thing about the story is that it focuses on the fact that how the adjustment and mutual understanding between the couple Sanjeev and Twinkle make a happy Marriage. The story arrests our attention as it records the emotional and cultural clash between a Hindu husband and his dislike for his wife's fascination for Christmas artefacts. But in reality it is nothing about the religious divide, but it is the subtlety of human feelings that makes up everything. After Sanjeev discovers his malady of possessive love, he "pressed the massive silver face to his ribs, careful not to let the feather slip, and followed her" (Lahiri, IOM 157).

"The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" is about a misfit, a young woman living in a rundown building in Calcutta, and she is in the care of her cousin and his wife and she is an epileptic. The absence of a man in her life to protect her frustrates her. Bibi herself unknowingly admits that her illness is not physical, but something psychological. Her problem is solved when she

becomes a mother before marriage. The following words of Bibi signify the desperate efforts of an exile to conceal her pangs of loneliness and keep a smiling face, “Now I am free to discover life as I please” (Lahiri, IOM 170).

“The Third and Final Continent” shows the hegemonic control still exercised by the European people over the third world people. Lahiri in this story makes it clear how the first generation migrants do stop brooding over their past, and try to fix their roots in an alien land. In this story, the narrator recounts his tale of leaving India in 1964 with a commerce certificate and the equivalent of ten dollars in his pocket. He sails on a cargo ship for three weeks across the Arabian, Red and Mediterranean seas to England. He lives in London with twelve or more penniless Bengali bachelors like himself. They live three or four in a room, and share the meals they cook together. He attends LSE and works at the university library. They have few responsibilities beyond their jobs. They lounge around on weekends and meet more Bengalis who join for dinners. Occasionally one of them moves out to live with a woman his family in Calcutta arranged for him to marry. When he is thirty-six years old, the narrator's family arranges a marriage in Calcutta and after that he settles down in America. The bond between the landlady Mrs. Croft and the narrator is beyond explanation. Mrs. Croft liked him and called his wife Mala “a perfect lady”. When he reads of Mrs. Croft’s obituary, he says, “I was stricken... Mrs. Croft’s was the first death I mourned in America for hers was the first life I admired; she had left this world at least, ancient and alone, never to return” (Lahiri, IOM 196). With a growing son, they attain contentment and happiness in this ‘third continent’ which is also the final for them. When he speaks of the difficulty in finding a home away from home in America to his son, he encourages him:

Whenever he is discouraged, I tell him that if I can survive on three continents, then there is no obstacle he cannot conquer. I am not the only man to seek fortune from home, and certainly I am not the first. Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have travelled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. (Lahiri, IOM 198)

What Jhumpa Lahiri probably means to explore through her work is the fact that the distinction between human cultures is man-made. The narrator of the last story feels drawn towards the old lady because she fills the cultural vacuum in his life. She takes care of her man emotionally and when he is at the crucial stage of his life, she helps him realize the importance of it. When he learns of her death, he feels the blow of the loss. The human bond that has tied them gets affected and he feels bad about her death. Not only that, Jhumpa makes her characters very humble and down to earth as well. Her characters bespeak the glory of common life, “I know that my achievement is quite ordinary. I am not the only man to seek his fortune far from home, and certainly I am not the first. . . . As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination” (Lahiri, IOM 198). That’s how the narrator of the last story narrates his experience on three continents.

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* can be considered as a piece of diasporic writing. This short story collection includes the stories about the lives of immigrant Indians who struggle to adjust between the Indian traditions that they left behind, and the entirely different western world that they have to encounter every day. Regarding the treatment of the diasporic experiences in Jhumpa Lahiri's work Aruti Nayar in her article "An Interpreter of Exile" rightly observes that:

... Lahiri negotiates the dilemmas of the cultural spaces lying across the continents with a master's touch. Though endowed with a distinct universal appeal, her stories do bring out rather successfully the predicament of the Indians who trapeze between and across two traditions, one inherited and left behind, and the other encountered but not necessarily assimilated. (4)

When an attempt is made to classify her stories of Bengal, Boston and beyond, critics fail miserably because her stories are tinged with universal appeal at once falling in the category of specific and general culture. "A Temporary Matter" deals with the problem of an Indian couple, but had it been the case all over the world. All women have felt the same way because the loss of a baby is an irreparable loss for a mother. Similarly, if a wife or a husband gets immersed into something very much and the needs of the husband or the wife take a back seat, then frustration is likely to be there in the relationship. In "Mrs. Sen" Mr. Sen has no time for his wife and her needs and that results in frustration. And in "This Blessed House" Twinkle bothers a fig about the care and attention her husband needs from her, and likewise the gap widens between the two engulfing the bliss of their life.

This is not to deny the vacuum that is very much there in the hearts of her characters because most of her characters are uprooted from their cultural roots. They struggle to settle down on a land that they feel is alien to them. The characters are not strong enough to give a tough fight to the hostile circumstances, instead they fall an easy victim to the circumstances because the distance from their roots has made them vulnerable. The most pitiable condition is that of Boori Ma, who has no option but to serve the people in Calcutta who have lived a life of luxury at her home in East Pakistan. She suffers tremendously at the hands of others because she has nothing to cling to except the memories of her past.

Works Cited

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Flamingo: Harper Collins, 2000. Print.

Mukherjee, A. K. "Marriage Bond in Jhumpa Lahiri's Fiction." *South-Asian Literatures*. Vol. 4. Ed. Bisawnath Kelker. Pune: APK Publishers, 2005. 56-63. Print.

Mukherjee, Bharati. Rev. of *Interpreter of Maladies*, by Jhumpa Lahiri. *Massachusetts Review* 3.2 (2011): 81-82. Web. 20 Jan. 2013.

Nayar, Aruti. "Jhumpa Lahiri: An Interpreter of Exile." *Tribune* 28 May 2000, Spectrum ed: n.pag. Web. 20 Mar. 2013.